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## Landmines in the Sand: The Falkland Islands

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## The Falkland Islands

# Landmines in the Sand: The Falkland Islands

The Falkland Islands contain approximately 117 mine fields. Many of the mines were remotely delivered. About 80 percent of these landmines are hidden beneath sandy beaches and peat, which can shift a mine's position and make detection and removal very difficult.

by Juan Carlos Ruan, *Inter-American Defense Board* and Jill E. Macheme

## Introduction

Ever since John Strong, a British naval captain, first set foot on the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) in 1690, this South Atlantic Island arc has been subject to numerous skirmishes and fiery debates between countries all vying for control.<sup>(1)</sup> However, none of these disputes created an ordeal comparable to the islands' most recent conflict between Britain and Argentina.

In 1765, Britain established a settlement on the Falkland Islands and declared ownership in the name of King George III.<sup>(2)</sup> Since then, the British have maintained control over the Falkland Islands asserting their sovereignty. However, Argentina contests Britain's rights to the islands and contends that their rights to the islands are defined in the Spanish Papal Grants of 1493 and 1494, which claimed all of South America (except for regions maintained by Portugal) as territory of Spain.<sup>(3)</sup> Argentina also sees the Falkland Islands as a representation of British colonialism, and it states that its proximity to the islands compared to that of Britain warrants control.<sup>(3)</sup> Though these opposing views have created bouts of turmoil for over 200 years, the most recent conflict occurred in 1982.

Orchestrated by Admiral Jorge Anaya, the Argentine Navy invaded the



Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982.<sup>(1)</sup> The British were unprepared for the attack, and the defensive attempts of the Royal Marines were ineffective against the thousands of Argentine troops. The British forces retreated to

Montevideo, Uruguay, in order to organize a counter-attack.<sup>(1)</sup> During the next two months, the Argentina junta successfully gained control of the islands building up a military post of more than 10,000 troops and naming



■ A truck decorated with the Falkland Islands' flag and a poster that reads "We don't want Argentine citizens on our British Islands" drives to protest a new agreement between Britain and Argentina. c/o AP



## Latin America

Argentine General Mario Menendez as the new military governor.<sup>(1)</sup> The attempts of the United States government, Peru and Britain to mitigate the situation with Argentina through mediation were unsuccessful due in part to the solidarity the war was creating among the Argentine people. The United Nations Security Council stepped in with a summons for the evacuation of the Argentine troops

battle. A UN Special Committee on decolonization is currently negotiating with both countries in hopes of finding sovereignty between the islands.<sup>(5)</sup> Moreover, heavy warfare left numerous areas burdened with landmines. Authorities at Port Stanley point out that there are currently 117 mine fields on the island containing approximately 25,000 anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines, 18,000 of which were placed

signs containing the warning "DANGER MINES." There are also some areas adjacent to mine fields where the presence of mines, due to tidal action or watercourses, is suspected. However, these areas are also marked with appropriate warning signs. Visitors to the Islands are briefed about the dangers and can acquire a mine field map available from the Joint Service Explosive Ordnance Disposal Operations Center (JSEODOC). If visitors come across a suspicious object, warns the briefing, they should do the following: do not move or touch the object, mark its position on the ground, note its position with a grid reference, if possible note its size, shape, color and distinctive markings (if any) and report it to the JSEODOC or the police in Stanley. They are also warned that "Entering a minefield, attempting to detonate mines, damaging minefield fences, taking away minefield signs and driving animals into minefields are criminal offenses that may result in a fine of up to 1,000 English pounds or a 12-month prison sentence."

The detection of landmines on the Falkland Islands is difficult because some of the mines were remotely delivered. About 80 percent of the landmines are hidden beneath sandy beaches and peat that can shift a mine's position and make detection and removal more difficult.<sup>(13)</sup> In 1983, heavy casualties in demining units stopped the first attempts to clear the Falkland Islands of landmines.<sup>(14)</sup> Since then, Britain has signed and ratified the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, which makes them responsible, as administrator of the Falkland Islands, for clearing the landmines by March 1, 2009.<sup>(11)</sup> Also, in July of 1999, both Argentina (who still claims the Falkland Islands and signed but did not ratify the treaty) and Britain agreed to join forces in the removal procedure.<sup>(7)</sup> All of the mine-infected areas have been enclosed and posted, and an Explosive Ordnance Disposal



while the EEC imposed a trade embargo over Argentina.<sup>(4)</sup> However, it was clear that resolution was far off as Britain sent more warships to the islands and rejected a United Nations (UN) peace proposal.<sup>(4)</sup> Likewise, Argentina continued to renounce any appeals for a truce.<sup>(1)</sup> After 72 days, the war was officially over on June 14 when the British regained control of the capital, Port Stanley, and Argentina agreed to a cease-fire.<sup>(1)</sup> In total, this battle of land, air and sea claimed 236 British and 655 Argentine personnel.<sup>(1)</sup>

### Landmine Situation

Though the fighting has ended, the Falkland Islands are faced with many problems in the aftermath of this

by Argentina.<sup>(7)</sup>

These mine fields are dispersed over a total area of 20 sq. km throughout the vicinities of Port Stanley, Port Howard, Fox Bay and Goose Green.<sup>(7)</sup> The UN declared that there were nine different types of AT and AP landmines used during the conflict.<sup>(9)</sup> The five AT mines are the No6 (Israel), SB-81 (Italy), FMK-3 plastic blast mine (Argentina), C-3-A/B (Spain) and the M1A1 (United States).<sup>(10)</sup> The four AP mines (approx. 5,000)<sup>(11)</sup> are the No4 (Israel), SB-33 (Italy), FMK-1 plastic blast mine (Argentina) and the P-4-B (Spain).<sup>(10)</sup>

Today these mine fields are well marked and do not pose a threat to those aware of the situation. These locations are marked with red triangular

Operation Center (EOD) has been established in Port Stanley with warnings to the communities about the dangers of landmines.<sup>(9)</sup> So far, the U.S. State Department has stated there are 14 reported casualties due to landmines.<sup>(6)</sup>

In all, 4,220 mines and 2,713,658 pieces of UXO have been removed from the islands.<sup>(8)</sup> Scientists in Britain have been experimenting with a device to detect landmines using electromagnetic energy to produce radar images of unseen landmines and hope to be able to use this and other technology in the demining of the Falkland Islands.<sup>(15)</sup> ■

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British soldiers encounter a large number of Gentoo penguins while on patrol in the Falkland Islands.  
c/o AP